

NEWS FROM

THE LIBERTARIAN PARTY

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New Communications Decency Act is "High-tech censorship," charges Libertarians

WASHINGTON, DC -- The Libertarian Party harshly condemned the telecommunications reform bill passed by the U.S. Senate yesterday because it contained sweeping new censorship laws aimed at electronic bulletin boards, commercial on-line services, and the Internet.

"The Communications Decency Act is a case of 20th-century politicians using 19th-century laws to control 21st-century technology," charged Libertarian Party Chair Steve Dasbach.

The censorship amendment, sponsored by J. James Exon (D-NE) and Dan Coats (R-IN), passed the Senate on June 14th by an 84-16 vote. It banned so-called "obscene" material from computer on-line services, with fines of up to \$100,000 and prison terms of up to two years for violations.

"Republicans and Democrats overwhelmingly lined up to support this high-tech censorship," said Dasbach. "It was bi-partisanship at its worst. Apparently there's no gridlock in Washington when it comes to gutting the First Amendment."

Dasbach said the Libertarian Party opposes the bill for numerous reasons.

- "This bill is censorship -- an effort by politicians to restrict the freedom of the electronic press. As such, it is a clear violation of the First Amendment. Free speech is free speech, whether it is distributed via an 18th-century printing press or a 20th-century modem," he said.

- "This bill threatens to interrupt and curb the rapid evolution of electronic information systems -- an area where America leads the world in innovation. It will have a chilling effect on these new technologies. A more certain way of

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guaranteeing permanent second-class status for American technological leadership is hard to imagine," said Dasbach.

- "This bill isn't needed. For example, the marketplace is rapidly moving to remedy any concerns parents might have about indecent material being available to children. Large commercial services like America Online already offer parents a 'lock-out' service to keep such material away from children. There are also commercial software products available, including the popular SurfWatcher, which monitor and limit on-line access. And, this week, three companies announced they are developing another software product to filter and block objectionable material from the Internet's World Wide Web," he said.

- "This bill usurps the role of parents. Senator Exon said he wants to protect children -- but *parents*, not Justice Department bureaucrats, should determine what children see, hear, or download. It's especially hypocritical for Republicans, who bemoan other government programs which weaken the family, to vote for paternalistic laws appointing Washington bureaucrats as the family censor," said Dasbach.

The Libertarian Party, America's third-largest political party, was a member of an Internet coalition assembled to fight the Communications Decency Act, along with the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Council for the Arts, the Center For Democracy and Technology, the National Writers Union, and People for the American Way.

On the topic of censorship, the Libertarian Party Platform states: "We oppose any abridgment of the freedom of speech through government censorship, regulation or control of communications media, including laws concerning electronic bulletin boards, communications networks, and other interactive electronic media. We hold them to be the functional equivalent of speaking halls and printing presses in the age of electronic communications, and as such deserving of full freedom."

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